

Participatory Aesthetics: Youth Performance as Encounter

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the notion of a participatory aesthetic is developed by exploring how a collaborative and creative process provides opportunities for young people to engage in an act of becoming in relation to one another, building powerful and affective art work that is not bound by the conventions of traditional forms of theatre and art making. The paper begins with a discussion on the role of affect and participation in applied theatre, offering a theoretical framework that is used to analyze two case studies. The first is a project in Accra, Ghana that resulted in a youth-led documentary film about HIV/AIDS and gender relationships. The second is a YouTube based applied theatre project with LGBTQ youth in Toronto, Canada. In both case studies the paper demonstrates the power of dialogue in building a participant driven aesthetic rendering of theatre for social change. The paper concludes stating that a participatory aesthetic is a deeply visceral and vulnerable encounter that builds important pedagogy through affective artistic engagement.

INTRODUCTION

I had a meeting recently to discuss the implementation of a digital storytelling project in a classroom setting. I was there as a consultant to share my experience in digital storytelling and help work through the pedagogical shaping of such an undertaking. I began by asking a number of questions about the goals of the project and one of the first responses was, 'I want it to be good, I don't want the videos to be bad.' This surprised me and I wanted to respond by saying 'Can it be bad?' but I bit my tongue, because I understood what was meant; the goal was student-led, but also achieving certain aesthetic standards, even if this meant taking some authorship away from the students. We would be 'setting them up for success.' This conversation was brief, but it brought up a number of questions I have been sitting with for years. What constitutes good and bad art in student-led or participatory creative work? Are participation and aesthetics at odds with one another? Must we judge creative beauty solely on the product that is created? How can we reimagine the notion of aesthetics through the power of participation?

In my experience as an applied theatre artist and scholar, common project goals such as anti-oppression education, social engagement, social change, youth participation, and youth empowerment often sit in tension with the goals of aesthetic quality and authorship (Gray, Baer, & Goldstein, 2015; Goldstein et al. 2014; Snell, 2013). This requires artist-educators to navigate competing interests throughout the creative play-building process and work to understand how important outcomes are negotiated. The field of applied theatre has begun to explore these tensions (Collins, 2015; Gallagher, 2014; Goldstein, 2012; Prentki & Preston, 2009; Thompson, 2009; White, 2015), however a great deal of the literature still focuses on the possibilities for applied theatre as a form of anti-oppression education rather than exploring the tensions that arise when drama is used as a form of anti-oppression education (Anderson & O'Connor, 2013; Boal, 2000; Cohen-Cruz, 2006; Neelands, 2009; Nicholson, 2005; Prendergast & Saxton, 2009; Woodland, 2012). Affect has also been taken up by applied theatre scholars in recent years building the argument that the affective realm of theatrical encounter is as important to the political work of applied theatre as any other component, and that the political, aesthetic, and affective cannot sit at odds with one another because

they are tangled together in performative moments (Gallagher, 2016; Nicholson, 2016; Thompson, 2009).

My focus within this field of study is in the belief that affective encounters govern the creative production of the work as much as the final performance event. Theatre artists are trained to attend to “the dramatic structure of the play..., the performers presence and physicality..., the staging..., as well as the language and words used in the script” (Gray, Baer, & Goldstein, 2015, p. 8). The focus on these elements of theatricality constitutes a dominant aesthetic of what theatre is and should be within traditional and applied theatre spaces. As artists engage this dominant aesthetic sensibility in order to build affective performances for audiences, the participatory possibilities of the form are potentially limited - authorship becomes a site of contention to be negotiated by those leading the project, rather than as a collaborative emergence from participants. It is from this understanding that I build and explore the notion of a participatory aesthetic, wherein the encounter between participants becomes the gage for understanding the aesthetic quality of the work rather than a valuation based on a cultural standard of theatricality.

PARTICIPATORY AESTHETICS

As mentioned above, there is widespread belief within the field of applied theatre that projects must produce work that meets prevailing notions of artistic merit, based on cultural and professionalized norms of the theatrical form (Prendergast & Saxton, 2010; Neelands, 2008; Thompson, 2009). This belief creates an opening for tensions to emerge around anti-oppression education, because ethical commitments to authorship and participation sometimes waver in response to the need for a specific aesthetic standard – that is governed by socio-cultural-political ideas of theatricality. This takes away power from the people whose stories, ideas, and representations are informing the theatrical performance, grooming their work to be taken over by a professional artist in the final stages of presentation. Most often the work that unfolds in this way is unaware of it’s own limitations. As an alternative, a participatory aesthetic builds a deeply visceral encounter through affective artistic engagement. A participatory aesthetic does not occur solely in a completed performance event, but rather is a collaborative process-based

concept that has the potential to provide opportunities for people to engage in acts of becoming in relation to one another and to build affective art work that is not bound by the conventions of traditional forms of theatre and art making. A participatory aesthetic situates the body as a site of knowing by creating an emerging entanglement of process and performance that lacks clear boundaries. This creates an opportunity to make the familiar strange as participants and audiences attune to the way that affect shifts, pulls, and pushes bodies by isolating the moment of ephemeral encounter and escalating it through aesthetic and creative means. This process opens up space for what Sara Ahmed (2015) calls “wonder”.

What is ordinary, familiar or usual often resists being perceived by consciousness. It becomes taken for granted, as the background that we do not even notice, and which allows objects to stand out or stand apart. Wonder is an encounter with an object that one does not recognize; or wonder works to transform the ordinary, which is already recognized, into the extraordinary. As such wonder expands our field of vision and touch (p. 179).

An affective encounter through artistic engagement with everyday experiences provides opportunities to critically examine the ordinary through wonder (Boal, 2000; Freire, 2009). This enables participants and audiences to notice how bodies move, touch, and see in relation to one another. As a form of applied theatre, this figurative distancing through aesthetic renderings (Snell, 2014; Snell, 2013) opens up possibilities to understand how affect impacts our bodies’ ability to ‘be’ and ‘do’. Applied theatre aesthetics than are not only an artistic “standard of excellence” as defined by euro-centric cultural norms (Neelands, 2008) whereby power asserts its legitimacy as it is buried beneath our assessment of theatricality (Rancière, 2009); instead aesthetics create an opportunity for encounter with the material, an embodied moment of becoming that emerges as bodies respond and react to one another (Collins, 2015). A participatory aesthetic moves away from an artist-led process of rendering stories through traditional notions of theatre and towards a participant-led approach where people can think and feel and respond in ways that are unexpected by attuning to the in-between-ness that facilitates learning.

To implement applied theatre projects from this stance there must be a shift towards understanding aesthetics as a relational intensity that is always in a state of becoming, but never completed, while also working to reveal the normative cultural ideals that are tied up in valuations of theatricality. Engaging a fluid becoming as an aesthetic rendering inhabits the space between art as teacher and viewer as learner by bringing an unknowability into the site of creation and shifts our understanding of applied theatre to a more embodied, relational, and affective approach to social change (Kumashiro, 2000; Nicholson, 2016). This emergent process works to reveal the unthinkable by attuning to what bodies do in relation to one another. In other words applied theatre has the potential to be a site of affective encounters that create openings for unknowable ways of being to emerge. The following case studies provide further insight into this understanding of a participatory aesthetic.

CASE STUDY #1: UNWRAPPING THE SWEETS

Unwrapping the Sweets was a project that I designed and facilitated with youth participants from the organization 'Theatre for a Change'. We explored topics such as HIV/AIDS, gender relationships, and teen pregnancy in the community of a densely populated urban area of Accra, Ghana called James Town. The project unfolded over 4 months with the group meeting 2-3 times a week for about 4 hours each time. Together the youth and I explored questions and experiences around the topics by engaging Theatre for Development (TfD) and Participatory Video (PV) activities. As a final outcome the youth decided they wanted to make a documentary film about the things they had learned from one another and use it as an advocacy tool throughout their community. The documentary was written, filmed, and edited entirely by the youth participants. While I was there as a guide, to offer suggestions and technical support, I maintained that the creative and narrative decisions belonged to the youth; this opened up space for an original aesthetic quality to emerge. The film uses process clips, original dramas, interviews with one another and community members, and ends with the questions that are still left unanswered. The film was screened throughout the community and broached subjects such as money expectations in relationships, safe sex practices, and the stigma of people living with HIV/AIDS.

The journey that was undertaken by the youth was one of personal exploration. They learned about themselves and their community through creative conversations. As an example there were a number of sessions where the young men and young women created separate performance work that addressed all the things they felt they could not say in front of members of the opposite sex. They filmed these performances, shared them with one another, and then created video responses. This dialogue continued for a number of weeks and opened up conversations that the youth had never had before. What does it mean to negotiate sex and relationships within the constraints of their cultural context? What are the expectations put on people of different genders? How do you begin to have conversations across these differences? These questions were asked not as a direct address, but rather through music, performance, poetry, and dance.

The pedagogy that emerged in and through this exchange was intense, and the pieces that were created (and included in the final documentary) offer an interesting social critique. In moments such as this the aesthetic qualities of the artwork are embedded in their pedagogical importance. What developed is a dialogic aesthetic, where the process of dialogue is in itself the work of art, and an understanding of that aesthetic lives in the space between the creative works where the performers bodies speak to one another through movement (Collins, 2015). Participants were affecting and being affected by one another while simultaneously interfering with shared assumptions about gender relationships through acts of spontaneity. This spontaneity as it emerges, entangles, and intra-acts with other bodies in movement creates a relational aesthetic that is always in process (Dewey, 2005; Rotas & Springgay, 2013). Movement in this sense is not about bodies on a trajectory from point A to point B, but rather bodies that exist in relational movement with other people and things. Here, aesthetic qualities emerge through embodiment, coming to know through the body as it moves in relation to the wider world (Manning & Massumi, 2014). This aesthetic act is an embedded and relational emergence of power and knowledge, where movement creates unpredictable compositions. When understood in this way, audience members are invited into the dance of dialogic aesthetics, and provided the opportunity to continue to (un)tangle what is known through the creative work while simultaneously continuing to create ephemeral moments of encounters through the act of witnessing. This

relational movement is a participatory aesthetic that implicates each person (creator and audience) as an active participant in creating meaning through the dialogue of the artwork.

In this case the aesthetic qualities of the film were not those of a professional Western filmmaker, the call to mosque is ever present throughout the footage, the vignettes mirror Nigerian television, and the arc of the film is episodic rather than narrative based. Instead the dialogic and relational aesthetic presents a group of youth pouring their stories and their own learning journey into an exploratory piece that shares their vulnerable souls with an audience and draws on additional aesthetic qualities that are culturally familiar. This culturally recognizable aesthetic rendering has created an encounter, an opportunity to be recognized, witnessed and validated and is a dialogic provocation for Ghanaian audiences because when screened in James Town the film facilitated heated and important debates. Yet, when screened for a British audience whose understanding of aesthetic excellence is defined by notions of colonialism and built through ideas of class and politics, they had trouble finding an entry point through which they could access the deeper visceral encounter proposed by the film. This resulted in stalled discussion and lack of intercultural understanding. In this case the aesthetic boundaries of euro-centric cinema worked to limit both the affective and effective potential of the film beyond its local context suggesting that aesthetic creation and reception are culturally and temporally bound. *Unwrapping the Sweets* challenged dominant western aesthetics in form, content, and purpose building a participatory aesthetic that presented a challenge to traditional ideas of applied theatre presentations by engaging instead with a youth-led exploratory, experimental, relational encounter. If understood in this way perhaps the British audience could have received this film as the dialogic and processual provocation it was meant to be rather than as a transmission of a completed artistic artifact.

CASE STUDY #2: QUEER CONNECTIONS

In 2011 I worked with three groups of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer) youth in the west, east, and north quadrants of Toronto, Canada on a project entitled *Queer Connections*. This project used YouTube to create weekly online conversations between the

three groups. At the beginning of the project each group of youth made a video exploring the theme of identity. The videos were then posted online and viewed by one of the other groups who in turn created a video response based on their reaction to the content and ideas proposed by their peers. The videos document the dialogue and an exploration of queer identities through drawings, acting, puppetry, dance, history, music, storytelling, playfulness, and personal narrative. Each video is not only a response to the video before it, but also a catalyst to the video that comes after it. Twenty-one short videos were created during the project each with their own artistic story, yet what I want to discuss here is the process of creation and dialogue between the videos as aesthetic quality.

In this project there was an ongoing process of making the private public. The youth found different ways to share their experiences and stories, some directly and others through metaphor and imagery. Applied theatre often draws on personal stories to build some form of public engagement. This engagement is political in nature, and interested in a social change agenda (Cohen-Cruz, 2006). The very act of making the private public is a political act as our personal experiences impact the public sphere, but in a discussion of aesthetics the act of making the private public is also a sensory act of vulnerability. To engage the senses in a political becoming in this way is an act of interference and disruption to the status quo. It is an emergent politic that attunes to the ephemeral and sensational, creating openings for affect. To lump the twenty-one videos of this project together in this discussion is difficult because they each engage their own aesthetic qualities, but through those qualities every single one of the videos engages with affection through personal narrative (real and imagined). Therefore, the embodiment of the private made public through vulnerability, wherein our bodies enfold their context onto themselves (Alvarez, 2014), makes personal story, told and performed by its creator a powerful aesthetic of its own. As an example, one of the videos created for the *Queer Connections* project uses stop motion animation to explore queer identities post-coming out. The group described the video as follows:

This week we responded to videos of coming out stories. They had very [i]ntimate stories that were shared by the other groups. We were inspired to continue the conversation by asking the

questions: what happens after one comes out? Where would you take yourself next? This video is part exploration and part celebration of the various queer narratives and its different roles and dynamics. Be fierce! (TaKe Out, 2012).

The video itself has no dialogue, the youth participants move around the frame in a jolted manner, due to the stop motion animation, their bodies playfully engage with one another as they try on wigs, make-up, and fitted baseball caps. The youth embody different identities as they spontaneously respond and react to their peers. This unscripted performance is an embodied and relational site of becoming, where the youth shift from fixed coming out narratives to queer possibilities, all the time only ever existing in the moment (Mazzei, 2013). It is this moment, the moment of engagement that brings forth the private to an affective place of encounter. It is through the relational aesthetic of the performers with one another that we as viewer are invited into the narrative. John Dewey (2005) believes that we cannot discuss an artwork without discussing what that art work does. In this case the art that was created is a contested site of political becoming, where groups of people engage with one another in an exchange of vulnerable self and exploration. This 'doing' in relation to others, becomes the aesthetics of the work of art, the stop-motion video is not a piece of art on its own but rather a sampling of a larger piece that can only be understood through the way it engages the videos that came before and after it. The participatory aesthetic emerges in the space between the twenty-one videos, providing each piece of the dialogue an opportunity to find its own unique portrayal of encounter as the youth navigate making the private public, vulnerability, personal narrative, and becoming in relation to the other groups across the city.

DISCUSSION

Thompson (2009) argues that applied theatre practice is focused on effective social outcomes and that we need to reimagine the aesthetic and affective engagement of our efforts. The concept of participatory aesthetics, as proposed here, is a site of affective encounter that enables us to reimagine how applied theatre work can be effective pedagogically, ethically, socially, and artistically.

Pedagogy

As a pedagogical engagement a participatory aesthetic provides participants with ownership and agency over their own learning. Rather than a prescribed outcome that is required to engage with a dominant aesthetic frame or even a specific goal-oriented outcome, a participant driven process focuses on the emergences in the spaces between the participants and the art. This unknown space presents a site of inquiry for participants to work through on their own terms and in their own ways – challenging, exploring, and creating movement together as their bodies entwine and entangle, push and pull, and emerge a new. This is evidenced in both case studies with the Ghanaian participants decision to turn the camera lens on themselves and their own learning journey as a culturally specific site of vulnerability and change, and with the challenge Toronto participants faced in artistic interpretation of difficult topics with peers they have never met. Both projects required a re-thinking of pedagogy, not as a pre-determined approach to a specific learning outcome, but rather as a journey through which participants would learn about themselves through their encounters with others. This dialogic artistic rendering is the very essence of a participatory aesthetic – where the encounter is the artistic artifact in and of itself.

Ethics

A participant-driven project that enables communities and individuals to express, examine, and explore within their own cultural context works to undermine the status quo by subverting and reimagining euro-centric, colonial, and even oppressive frames of knowing. While acknowledging that a facilitator or professional artist will undoubtedly hold power within the context of an applied theatre project, the choice to engage in dialogic art-making from the hearts and minds of participants is a step towards acknowledging and diffusing this power differential. A participatory aesthetic demands that ownership of both the process and product remains entirely in the hands of participants and that in doing so a new aesthetic quality emerges that can be recognized, valued and assessed through a matrix of affective encounter. For both case studies this emerges through the process of encounter – with one another, with me as facilitator, and with audiences; wherein the artistic product and aesthetic judgment shifts to a site of becoming in relation to those around us.

Social Change

Art for social change is often cited as a way to bridge empathetic understanding, to see the world from another's point of view (Mitchell, 2001; Rivers, 2013; Shapiro & Hunt, 2003; Wang, 2010). However, this has the potential to reproduce a Self/Other binary, which can contribute to the repetition and circulation of harmful and oppressive discourses, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia (Kumashiro, 2000). It is therefore necessary to use the theatrical form not only as a site of empathy, but also one in which we can complicate ideas, feel with and through one another, attune to the way that affect is circulating through bodies, and respond with a willingness to explore the unthinkable (Gallagher, 2016). In applied theatre the artist is not a sole muse - rather the artist is a community of learners who work together to reflect on their own experiences and knowledges, to transform harmful practices by engaging with what is silenced, hidden, or unsaid. This reflexivity provides space for artists to engage with an audience in a raw and gritty approach to artistic creation. Complicating theatre in this way means that at times seemingly different approaches to theatrical presentation are potentially intertwined and overlapping: participants may subvert the dominant through the traditional and vice versa. This emerges in both case studies as participants draw on their own knowledges, contexts, and bodies to create and explore ideas through an artistic process. This collaborative art making is not polished and complete, but rather a process of performance, creation, and presentation that is designed to ask questions, to open up dialogue, and to reveal what is often unspoken or unknown.

Building on Helen Nicolson's (2005) idea of transportation (in contrast to transformation) as a momentary and often fleeting state of change, a participatory aesthetic relies on the ephemeral encounters of bodies in motion as a site of social change. When bodies are impacted by one another, even if just momentarily, a shift occurs - the trajectory of that body has been altered. Within the *Queer Connections* project this is seen when the videos respond in unexpected ways – shifting the dialogue to challenge the preconceived ideas of the group as the conversation spirals in intricate new directions. Within *Unwrapping the Sweets* this movement is altered through a block of affective energy when the artistic artefact is denied within a different cultural context. In

both cases the aesthetic encounter has elicited a moment of transportation – what comes next is unknown.

Artistry

Conroy (2015) states “Aesthetics enables us to activate analysis of the experience itself, to think in terms of our visceral and sensory responses and to extrapolate these into understandings of human agency and experience” (p. 2). This suggests that aesthetics are the very thing through which we are able to encounter one another, they are an ephemeral and embodied affection that emerges in and through our experiences. In discussing a dialogic aesthetic, Collins (2015) believes that one of the biggest challenges is “accepting the risk and vulnerability that come with dialogue” (p. 123). This risk and vulnerability provide the heart of a participatory aesthetic because they position the sensory self as the site of artistic creation. In sharing ourselves through others, by making the private public, a relational aesthetic emerges and invites people into dialogue with one another. This dialogical process is a site of aesthetic becoming. Dewey (2005) offers an interesting metaphor to describe a processual aesthetic when he says, “But if one sets out to *understand* the flowering of plants he is committed to finding out something about the interactions of soil, air, water, and sunlight that condition the growth of plants” (p. 2). In this sense, we should not be evaluating art as a completed object (film, performance, video), rather it is an experience through which many components (story, politic, and experience) encounter one another creating a new emergence that redefines our understanding of aesthetics as something that can be understood through feeling and is situated within a dialogic process of becoming.

CONCLUSION

Our cultural relationship to polished and professional aesthetics is shifting through the emergence of participatory media. Cell phone videos uploaded to YouTube have the potential to change the world by eliciting debate and rendering powerful stories. Although not a facilitated applied theatre process, this reimagining of the public sphere, where the masses have shifted from cultural consumers to cultural producers is engaging with a participatory aesthetic (Snell,

2014). Through our encounters, our becomings, and our narratives people are capable of creating provoking and engaging artwork on their own terms and for their own purposes. Applied theatre facilitators and academics can use the concept of a participatory aesthetic to navigate the tensions that riddle the field; questions of aesthetics, participation, ethics, and assessment (Prendergast & Saxton, 2016) can all be examined through a dialogic and relational lens of knowing and becoming. Although the case studies discussed in this paper are both youth projects, the ability to engage with a participatory aesthetic is not limited to youth. Youth are perhaps more willing to take risks with the unknown and this riskiness opens up possibilities for creative encounters. Each and every one of us can engage with a pedagogy of vulnerability as a site of becoming and it is this that defines a participatory aesthetic.

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